

Igor Zevelev  
Jim Havas

Igor Zevelev, an academic turned bureau chief, took a break from the hustle and bustle in his current home Washington, D.C., to attend the “Russian Journalism Under Fire Conference” at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.

The university invited Zevelev along with other experts on Russian journalism to talk about reporting the news in the former Soviet Union. The conference was held April 2 and 3.

To Zevelev, covering the news is new. Before he joined the Russian News and Information Agency Novosti, a Russian state owned wire service based in Moscow, Zevelev taught at universities and published in academic articles.

Receiving doctorates from Moscow State University and the Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences in history and political science, Zevelev’s work has taken him far from the motherland.

He has taught students at colleges throughout the United States as prestigious as the University of California, Berkley, and has had fellowships at the Woodrow Wilson Center and at the U.S. Institute of Peace. He’s published five books on international relations.

Zevelev made the switch from professor to news agency in 2005, when he became the Washington Bureau chief for RIA Novosti.

“I got the job the usual Russian way,” says Zevelev. “I heard about it from a friend.”

Though his official title is bureau chief, Zevelev actually oversees all eight of the organization’s employees working out of New York City and Washington, D.C.

Of the seven RIA Novosti employees in the nation’s capital, only three produce new stories about U.S. policy to be sent around the world through the Russian wire service.

As bureau chief, Zevelev himself doesn’t write any articles. Of the bureau’s two functions—reporting the news from the U.S. back to Russia and informing Americans about the former U.S.S.R.—he deals almost entirely with the latter as what he calls an “unofficial diplomat.”

When asked what he wants Americans to know about Russia, Zevelev responds, “I want Americans to know more about Russia.”

To that end, Zevelev appears on television shows like “Foreign Exchange,” a weekly program about international relations produced for Public Broadcasting, and he meets with American politicians and members of the press.

“[This job] has given me the opportunity to meet new and interesting people. You say, widen horizons,” says Zevelev.

So far the change has been good for him, even though he plans on returning to Russia and his academic work sometime in the future.

“There should be a reality check from time to time,” says Zevelev, noting that his experience with RIA Novosti has been more hands-on than his work in academia.

Still the work of Zevelev’s current employer has drawn criticism. Some people feel that the fully government owned RIA is incapable of reporting news that paints a poor picture of the Russian government. Zevelev doesn’t see it that way.

He compares RIA Novosti to the U.S. Bureau of Public Affairs, an American agency that works to send the State Department's message abroad. According to Zevelev, the RIA's message and manager haven't caused any bad blood between him and Russian journalists who work for private agencies.

"We journalists are one big community," says Zevelev. "We are not separated by big Berlin Walls."